Running head: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The Significance of Controversial Issues in the Social Studies Classroom

Austin Peay State University

In order to maintain a democratic society, an educated population is imperative. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) believes that this includes the ability to discuss and investigate diverse and controversial issues (2007). Stradling (cited in Hahn and Harwood, 1990) suggests that issues that generate conflicting opinions based on alternative value systems are considered controversial.

What then does a controversial issue discussion entail? Hahn and Harwood (1990) describe such discussions as reflective dialogue among students, or students and teachers, about an issue on which there is a disagreement. In the Social Studies classroom these issues may be social, political, or economical. Such conversations usually occur after a question has been posed; the dialogue that results allows students to make comments, voice their opinions, and provide supportive evidence (Hahn and Harwood, 1990).

There are many reasons that these discussions should be taking place in classrooms across the United States. According to Ochoa-Becker (1999), “Social Studies teachers ought to be explicitly aware that the compelling reason for the existence of social studies curricula is to foster values and public practices that are consistent with democratic values” (p. 338). The values of our democracy include equality, freedom, and due process. We also promote respect for all people, regardless of religion, nation, culture, or disability. In order to foster these values in future generations we must develop critical thinkers who can make informed and justified decisions in a democratic manner (Ochoa-Becker, 1999). This paper will investigate the significance of controversial issues in the Social Studies classroom. I will provide an overview of (1) the skills students develop, (2) the benefits and effects of, and (3) considerations and methods for implementing controversial issues into classroom discussion.

**Skills Developed**

What skills do students develop through the discussion of controversial issues? According to Byford (2006), discussion and analysis of controversial issues helps in the development of critical thinking skills as well as interpersonal skills. Hahn and Harwood (1990) assert that students develop cognitive skills including constructing hypotheses and evaluating collected information. With the development of these skills, such discussions foster comprehension (Taylor, 2007). Students also develop important attitudes and communication skills (Hahn and Harwood, 1990).

According to Winn (2004), when thinking critically, “we seek to penetrate to the core of an issue or problem” (p. 497). The following is included in critical thinking: ability to ask important questions and explore alternatives; ability to determine what is missing or needed to solve a problem; a sense of what information is important and not important; a willingness to explore and test one’s feelings and theories; and the ability to accept others’ opinions and see things from another person’s point of view (Winn, 2004). In the Social Studies classroom, possessing the skills of critical thinking will aide students in clarifying and justifying their opinions on public issues, literature and historical events (Byford, 2006). The development of critical thinking skills goes hand in hand with the development of interpersonal skills.

The development of interpersonal skills includes learning to listen carefully, responding with empathy to others, the use of persuasion, and working cooperatively in groups (Hahn and Harwood, 1990). Throughout the process of developing these skills in the Social Studies classroom, it is important that students learn to appreciate that some answers to questions that affect society are better than others. They should be willing to stand behind their own beliefs and opinions on such issues, even if others do not agree with them. Students also need to realize that even though they disagree with someone, it does not make either of them wrong. As long as the evidence presented is intellectual and seems valid, individuals may simply have to agree to disagree. Part of developing interpersonal skills is understanding that it is not a sign of ethical, moral, or political weakness to be willing to listen to individuals that may have different opinions and beliefs (Martinson, 2005). The ability to accept others’ opinions and think critically helps to prepare students for their future as citizens in a pluralistic democracy (Byford, 2006). Being exposed to controversial issues, and given the chance to develop such skills will effect and benefit students and ultimately society in many ways.

**Benefits and Effects of Discussing Controversial Issues**

By implementing controversial issues, along with probing, thoughtful questions, teachers serve their students and democracy. All students benefit from learning to make reflective decisions in their lives (Ochoa-Becker, 1999). Possessing the wisdom with which to make choices and the ability to carry out citizenship duties produces well-informed citizens. The democratic process hinges on the ability to speak freely about ideas and values that exist in our society and in other countries. Without this, our democracy would disappear (NCSS, 2007). The main task for democratic citizens is to discuss with other citizens the public good and how to achieve it (Hahn and Harwood, 1990). According to Ochoa-Becker (1999), we must develop critical thinkers who can make informed and justified decisions in a democratic manner. Regular exposure to controversial issues will help prepare students to deal with the variety of social problems that exist (Hahn and Harwood, 1990).

Students that discuss controversial issues in the classroom develop a more mature value system in a thoughtful and rational manner (Ochoa-Becker, 1999). Studies have shown that there are positive correlations between an open classroom climate and levels of “political efficacy, interest, and participation” (Rossi, 2006, p. 112). Rossi states that students in such classrooms are likely to trust political officials and less likely to be negative about government. It has been found that students who participated in classroom discussions often reported more positive political attitudes and higher participation in political activities. Such discussions in the classroom have also been positively related to following current events and talking about political matters with friends and family (Hahn and Harwood, 1990). Remy concludes that students not only display positive attitudes toward politics, but also towards Social Studies classes in general (cited in Hahn and Harwood, 1990). “Democratic discourse stimulates student interest” (Hahn, cited in Rossi, 2006, p. 113). It also encourages active learning and student participation (Byford, 2006). Rossi (2006) states,

Teaching about these issues provides opportunities for students to understand how knowledge is constructed and how different cultural assumptions influence different perspective on knowledge. It provides an opportunity for students to clarify and reflect on their perspectives and how the perspectives of others are different. I found that students exposed to frequent discussions of controversial issues develop a more complex, tentative, and skeptical disposition toward knowledge. (p. 113)

According to Hahn and Harwood (1990), it is probable that if more discussions about controversial issues were held in Social Studies classrooms, fewer students would find the subject boring and irrelevant to the real world. The goal of Social Studies instruction in our nation’s schools should be effective and responsible participation in a pluralistic-democratic society (Martinson, 2005). If students are given the proper guidance, and opportunities to engage in critical thinking and discourse in school, it is more likely they will be able to successfully carry out their responsibilities as citizens (Winn, 2004).

**Considerations and Methods for Implementing Controversial Issues into Discussion**

Ensuring that discussions of controversial issues are beneficial takes skill, practice, and preparation on the part of the teacher (Hahn and Harwood, 1990). According to NCSS (2007), such issues must be brought into the classroom without the assumption that there is a right answer. Teachers must approach issues in a “spirit of critical inquiry exposing the students to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own” (NCSS, 2007, section 3). The discussion method is one of several strategies used by teachers, however many tend to be uncomfortable with it because of lack of control and comfort when students openly discuss issues. When teachers use only one teaching style on a regular basis, they neglect the opportunity they have to use a variety of teaching techniques (Byford, 2006). The following are points that should be addressed and examples of techniques that may be used to implement the discussion of controversial issues into the classroom.

When planning to incorporate controversial issues into instruction, a teacher should consider several things. The first should be selecting the issues to be discussed. Teachers should consider student interests and the relevance of issues to students’ lives. The second is preparing students for discussion. Teachers must determine guidelines for interaction and train their students in discussion techniques. Another consideration is providing adequate information sources. Students must have information available to them and have had a chance to acquire background knowledge about the topic. Establishing an open discussion climate is also important. Creating an intellectually safe environment includes modeling appropriate discussion behaviors such as listening and not interrupting. Another issue is maintaining focus and direction. Teachers must keep students on topic by developing a discussion agenda. To ensure intellectual balance- teachers must expose students to the full range of perspectives on any issue, and if an important view point is left out attempt to prompt students to discover it before disclosing it personally. Encouraging equal participation is critical to discussion. Teachers must draw all students into the conversation which may not be an easy task, but can typically be achieved by developing a participation system. Lastly, teachers should consider how they will express their personal views. Teachers must be careful to state that their feelings are only their opinion and be willing to reflect on and defend them to the students (Hahn and Harwood, 1990).

How do you incorporate these issues into lessons? Taylor ( 2007) gives several ideas in her article *Fostering Engaging and Active Discussions in Middle School Classrooms.* The first activity is called a fishbowl discussion. This is a way to organize a group discussion that promotes student engagement. Three to five seats are placed inside of a larger circle. The students in the inner circle are given a discussion topic, and if someone in the outer circle wants to join, they tap one of the inner students on the shoulder and replace them. Fishbowl discussions place the focus on students’ ideas and not on the teacher’s. Another method is called Ticket to talk. Students write questions on slips of paper at the end of class, and teachers use these for whole or small group discussion or as writing prompts. A third method is the use of discussion webs. These encourage students to discuss text by creating a framework for students to consider different sides of an issue before drawing conclusions (Taylor, 2007). These are only a few of the many methods available for teachers to incorporate controversial issues into instruction.

**Conclusion**

Rossi states that, “Even though Social Studies teachers may value it, the discussion of controversial issues is rare in most Social Studies classrooms” (p. 112). In fact, it is these issues that reflect the most important values of society and that are most relevant to citizens and students (Winn, 2004). It is imperative for students to know about the issues they face, as well as the points of view that shape public debate, if they are going to be citizens that are capable of governing themselves intelligently in a free society. They must know how to analyze issues, examine all sides, and justify their decisions (Ochoa-Becker, 1999). There are many ways to implement these issues in the classroom. The use of controversial issues in the Social Studies curriculum helps students to develop critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and prepares them for their role as future responsible, decision-making, democratic citizens.

References

Byford, J. (2006). *Analyzing public issues-clarification through discussion: A case study*

*social studies teachers.* Retrieved February 21, 2008, from http://findarticles.com /p/articles/mi\_qa4033/is\_200610/

Caron, E. (2005). What leads to the fall of a great empire? Using central questions to design issues-based history units. *Social Studies, 96*(2), 51-60. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from Academic Search Premier database.

Hahn, C. & Harwood, A. (1990). *Controversial issues in the classroom.*  Bloomington, IN: Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education. (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED 327453)

Martinson, D. (2005). Building a tolerance for disagreement: An important goal in social studies instruction. *The Clearing House, 78*(3), 118-122.

National Council for Social Studies Academic Freedom Committee (2007). *Academic freedom and the social studies teacher.* Retrieved February 21, 2008, from http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/freedom/

Ochoa-Becker, A. (1999). Decision making in middle school social studies: An imperative for youth and democracy. *The Clearing House, 72*(6), 337-340.

Rossi, J. (2006). The dialogue of democracy. *Social Studies, 97*(3), 112-120. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from Academic Search Premier database.

Taylor, D. (2007). Fostering engaging and active discussions in middle school classrooms. *Middle School Journal, 39*(1), 54-59.

Winn, I. (2004). The high cost of uncritical teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan, 85*, 496-497.